

# Little Creek Grill could be start of something big in small coastal town

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## BAY TO BAY NEWS



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Owner Joe Petroulis stands in front of the newly opened Little Creek Grill, one of the few places to get a bite to eat along Del. 9 in Little Creek.

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By Mike Finney

LITTLE CREEK — It might not appear to be a huge deal to people just passing through Little Creek while driving on the Del. 9 Coastal Heritage Scenic Byway.

However, the opening of the Little Creek Grill at 111 Main St. a couple of weeks ago could mean big things for the quiet community that sits about a mile to the west of the Delaware Bay.

Middletown resident Joe Petroulis owns the Little Creek Grill, and he sees the area as ripe with opportunity.

In fact, he is also planning a Waterman's Village adjacent to his restaurant, which also serves as a grocery store and bait shop.

The "village" is designed to be a reinterpretation of a small-town seaport, with a micro-retail center built on the town's coastal history and "aimed at creating a shopping and dining experience that is uniquely Little Creek."

Opening the Little Creek Grill was just the first step, according to Mr. Petroulis. He said members of the close-knit community are already beginning to embrace it.

"They absolutely love it," the restaurateur said of his local customers. "People come from Bowers (Beach). Kitts Hummock loves it. Pickering Beach put up a big sign that said, 'We welcome Little Creek Grill to our community.'"

"We've even had people come as far as Elkton (Maryland). One lady got 17 subs to take back."

Barb Marvel, who has lived in Little Creek for 28 years, said the opening of the eatery sent a signal that things were about to change — for the better.

"We love it," said Ms. Marvel, who also is one of eight employees at the establishment. "We haven't had a store here in 12 or 13 years. I like the cooking, and I like to see the people happy about coming in here. We finally got something back in town."

"Here, you get to see everyone. If the store wasn't here, I'd be sitting at home. It makes it feel more like a community, where people can come in and talk to one another."

The Little Creek Grill serves pizza, hot and cold subs, breakfast, burgers and dogs, sandwiches, salads and more.

Currently, Mr. Petroulis has a captive audience. He is the only restaurant/grocery store in Kent County on the Del. 9 scenic byway.

“From Delaware City to us, there’s nothing,” he said. “From us (heading south), you’ve got to hit Route 1 and then get off Route 1. We’re the only ones back here.

“What (Little Creek was) missing was something close, something with convenience. We offer groceries. We offer pizza, subs, lunch, breakfast. In the morning, we open up at 5. Monday through Saturday, we’re open from 5 a.m. until 8 at night, and then, Sunday, we’re open from 7 to 7.”

He added, “We sell propane. We refill propane bottles. We sell bait to all the fishermen. We sell frozen bait, the bloodworms, all the night crawlers.”

Mr. Petroulis said he is there for the locals, the passersby and the watermen, hunters and farmers in the area.

Those early risers are the primary reason why he opens his grill at 5 six days a week.

“All the crabbers out on the water, they get out early, and they want somewhere to go early enough to get breakfast,” he said. “And then, when they’re done on the water, it’s close by to get lunch.”

The Little Creek Grill is a tremendous convenience for those who live close by who haven’t had a store at which to shop in recent memory.

“We’re building it back up and giving the local people somewhere to go instead of going into the city and onto Route 13,” Mr. Petroulis said. “That’s all we hear about. We don’t have to drive all the way to Dover to get a bag of chips or a soda.”

People were obviously excited, as they kept coming in while the restaurant was still being developed.

“It took us a year-and-a-half to get to where we’re at, and we were just having people driving in, thinking we were open because the old sign was still hanging,” said Mr. Petroulis, “and we’re carrying out two-by-fours, and people are coming in asking, ‘Can I get a soda?’ and we’re like nowhere near that point yet.”

Now, the sign on the door finally says ‘Open,’ and he has plans to stay that way for a long time to come.

**Bigger things on the horizon**

The Waterman's Village, which will be adjacent to the Little Creek Grill, is in its planning stages but not that far away from becoming a reality, according to Mr. Petroulis.

The concept of the micro-retail outlets was developed in partnership with Mr. Petroulis, the town of Little Creek and the University of Delaware.

Micro-retail was inspired by the ingenuity to reuse Federal Emergency Management Agency trailers as pop-up storefronts along the Mississippi Gulf Coast in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.

Mr. Petroulis said the first micro-retail units have proven to be an invaluable asset to small coastal towns looking for economic opportunity and resiliency. Characterized by a small footprint, modular design and portability, the structures can house businesses at an attainable and sustainable scale.

The Waterman's Village of Little Creek is currently set to house seven micro units, including Horseshoe Market (a three-season shop supplying summer produce, fall pumpkins and Christmas trees), Lucky's Bait and Tackle, Big Scoop Ice Cream and Lil' Creek Kayak, which will allow visitors to go out on the waterways. There are spots for two more storefronts.

Mr. Petroulis said these are all in the process of opening this year.

"It's awesome, you know," he said. "The University of Delaware, they did a great job. They did a lot of hard work planning it out. We're excited about it. We're starting the project. We're building the buildings right now, and when we get them in, then we can advertise for mom and pop shops, entrepreneurs and specialty stores."

Work is also continuing for Little Creek resident and Realtor Tom Antoniou, who is pursuing his plan for Little River Landing, a proposed three-story mixed-use building on the site of the old Cavaliers East Restaurant at 63 Main St. That restaurant is in the process of being demolished.

Mr. Petroulis is excited about the prospects for the area.

"I'm committed. We're in," he said. "We promised the town from the beginning what we were going to do, and we're sticking to it. The first thing is to get (the Little Creek Grill) open and running, and now, we're into the Waterman's Village.

“Right now, we’re into the design of the buildings. They’re all going to look like cottages. The University of Delaware designed it all, so we have a platform to go off of. I’d say we’ll start seeing some progress on that within the next month or so.”

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